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EIF POLICY BRIEFING

Social & emotional learning: supporting children and young people's mental health

What is the problem?

There is a widely held view that more and more children are experiencing mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression and conduct disorders.

- In 2004 (the last national prevalence survey), nearly 10 per cent of all children and young people aged between 5 and 16 in England and Wales had a diagnosable mental health disorder.¹
- In 2016, 90 per cent of secondary school headteachers reported that they had seen an increase in rates of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression among their pupils over the previous five years.²
- The Children's Society's latest research into children's wellbeing shows that children are less happy than they were in 2010.³
- A National Study of Health and Wellbeing (a survey of 9,500 children and young people, conducted by NatCen and ONS on behalf of NHS Digital) is currently underway and expected to report in 2018. The results will give us a more up-to-date picture of the mental health of children and young people.

Poor mental health in childhood is associated with a number of negative outcomes in later life, including poorer educational attainment and employment prospects.

- Mental health problems in young people can result in lower educational attainment (for example, children with conduct disorder are twice as likely as other children to leave school with no qualifications) and are strongly associated with behaviours that pose a risk to their health, such as smoking, drug and alcohol abuse and risky sexual behaviour.⁴

Children from deprived backgrounds are significantly more likely to experience mental health difficulties than those from more affluent backgrounds. Recent research shows that this inequality gap is widening.

- Analysis using longitudinal data from the Millennium Cohort Study, which is following the physical, social, cognitive and emotional development of 19,517 children born in the UK in 2000/1, showed that children from the lowest-income families are four times more likely to have mental health problems than those from the highest-earning backgrounds, and that this gap is widening.⁵

WHAT IS SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING?

Social and emotional learning is the process by which children acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

WHO ARE WE?

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is an independent charity that champions and supports the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of children, young people and their families, reduce hardship and improve value for money in the long run.

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- Similarly, a recent quantitative study in Glasgow, using data on 4,011 children at age 4 and 3,166 of these children at age 7, showed that children living in the most deprived areas had higher levels of mental health difficulties at age 4 than their most affluent counterparts. By the age of 7 years, children from the most deprived areas were 3.5 times more likely to have mental health difficulties than their more affluent peers.⁶

Social and emotional learning: a critical part of the solution

Social and emotional skills, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making, are fundamental to children's health, wellbeing and future success, including their educational attainment.⁷

Emotional wellbeing and self-esteem in childhood are strongly associated with good mental health in adulthood. Children's social skills, self-control, self-regulation and self-efficacy also appear to be important to adult mental health and wellbeing.⁸

Like cognitive capabilities, social and emotional skills are malleable. They can be taught and developed throughout childhood, adolescence and beyond. Research also indicates that some social and emotional skills lay the foundation for later skill development. Skills learned in primary school act as building blocks for more complex skills learned throughout secondary school.⁹

Schools play a central role in children and young people's social, emotional and academic development. Engaging in effective social and emotional programmes is associated with significant short- and long-term improvements for children and young people.

- There is a substantive body of international evidence to indicate that high-quality school-based programmes focused on social and emotional development are associated with significant improvement across the emotional, social, behavioural and academic domains. In addition, they have been proven to reduce the risk of negative youth outcomes, such as antisocial behaviour, crime, substance misuse and mental health problems including anxiety and depression.^{10,11,12,13,14}
- Children with stronger social and emotional competencies are more likely to enter into and graduate from college or university, to succeed in their careers, to have positive work and family relationships, better mental and physical health, and reduced criminal behaviour, and to become engaged citizens.^{15,16,17}
- Recent US evidence has demonstrated the significant net economic benefits (such as the reduced social costs of substance misuse or increased earnings due to improved school attainment) that can be achieved through interventions aimed at promoting children and young people's social and emotional learning.¹⁸

KEY RESOURCES

EIF report: Feinsten, L. (ed) (2015) *Social and emotional learning: skills for life and work*, available at www.EIF.org.uk

EIF Guidebook of early intervention programmes: www.Guidebook.EIF.org.uk

What needs to change?

1. Social and emotional learning should be given greater prominence within schools, given its links to mental health as well as attainment, employment prospects and other outcomes for children. In particular:

- Personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) should be compulsory in all schools, with dedicated time and a curriculum that reflects the current evidence base. Social and emotional learning should be a core part of PSHE.
- The new Ofsted common inspection framework and future Department for Education work on how schools can measure the impact of their work to support pupil wellbeing should include specific consideration of how effectively schools are supporting the development of social and emotional skills.

2. There is a need to implement high-quality social and emotional skills-based interventions within the context of a whole-school approach.

Comprehensive implementation tools and guidelines are required to support schools in adopting a whole-school approach to social and emotional learning. Organisations that support schools and evidence-based learning – including the Early Intervention Foundation, and the Education Endowment Foundation – should take the lead in ensuring that this evidence is available and applicable.

3. Teachers and administrators need good quality training in effective teaching practices to support social and emotional learning, to enable this to become a part of everyday classroom activity. The development of knowledge and skills about social and emotional learning should be incorporated into both pre-service and in-service teacher training.

4. Teachers or school support staff should also be trained by specialists to deliver more targeted, evidence-based support for children with emerging mental health needs. Small-group or one-to-one social and emotional learning programmes can play an important role in the provision of more targeted, intensive support addressing the needs of children at risk of developing problems. Such programmes have been shown to impact on a range of problems including depression and anxiety, conduct problems, violence prevention and conflict resolution.^{19,20,21}

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Early Intervention Foundation

10 Salamanca Place, London SE1 7HB

W: www.EIF.org.uk • E: info@eif.org.uk • T: @TheEIFoundation • P: +44 (0)20 3542 2481

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